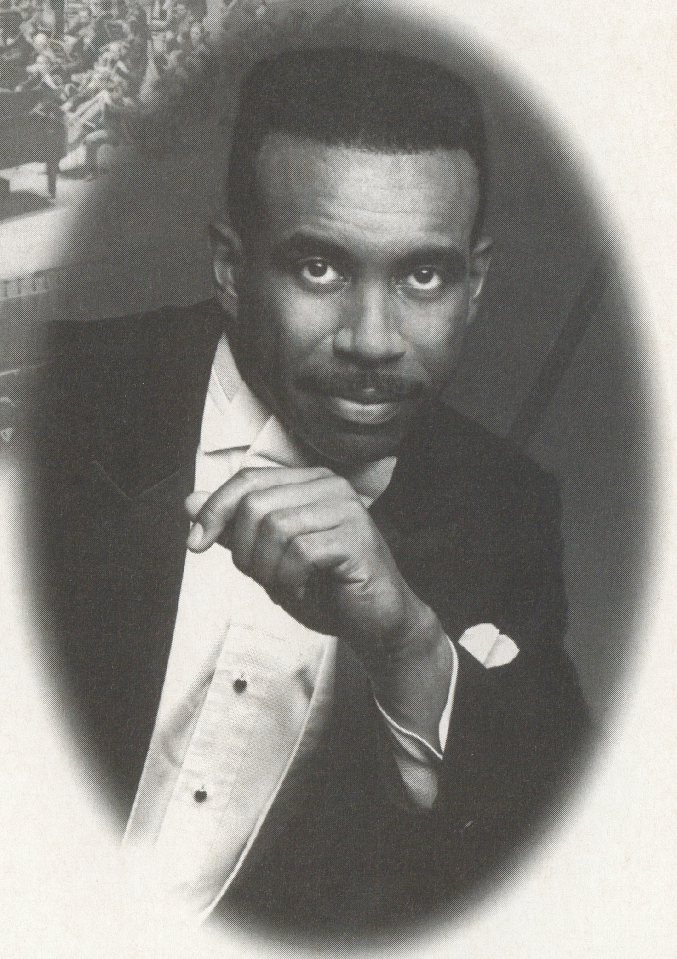




*It began with
a lovable, old upright
and a glass jar
of chocolates...*



*Leon Bates then and now:
A photo montage from the cover of the
April/May 1970 issue of American Music
Teacher, depicting Bates' debut with the
Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra shortly
after winning the first MTNA national
collegiate artist piano competition, and
a recent publicity photograph.*

Leon Bates Reminisces

by
Joanne Haroutounian

Refreshingly expressive, charming, witty, with a focused intensity that is captivating—these are words that can describe Leon Bates at the keyboard. These same qualities are revealed in the delightful personality of this outstanding American pianist as he reminisces about his childhood, his beloved teachers, the importance of artistic learning and nurturing audiences of tomorrow.

Joanne Haroutounian teaches at George Mason University and has an independent studio in Arlington, Virginia. She is a member of the editorial committee of American Music Teacher and national coordinator of MTNA's MUSICLINK program.

Over the past twenty years, Leon Bates has established himself as one of America's leading pianists. His mastery of the instrument has led him to perform with major symphonies all over the world. He has over thirty concerti comfortably in his repertoire with a special passion for the works of George Gershwin. A recording artist for the Orion, Performance Records and Naxos labels, Bates recently filmed "Music in the Twentieth Century" for PBS and appears in an intriguing classical music video performing Gershwin's Concerto in F with the Basel Symphony. A native Philadelphian, he currently enjoys hosting a new radio series entitled "Notes From Philadelphia."

Bates' commitment to working with young people is extraordinary. During a single concert season, he performs over fifty residency programs in conjunction with orchestra engagements and recitals to inspire, motivate and delight students through his love of music. As a master teacher, he is a favorite on college campuses because of his broad interests outside of music, including dance, theater, sports and body building. In 1993, he received the Raoul Wallenberg Humanitarian Award from the Greater New York Wallenberg Committee for his extensive work with children.

Almost thirty years ago, in 1969, Bates was MTNA's first collegiate artist national piano competition winner. He places this accomplishment first in his biography's list of awards and fondly remembers his picture superimposed over that of the Cincinnati Symphony in *American Music Teacher*. I was fortunate to catch him between flights on a recent concert tour. He shared images of his musical development, beginning with a lovable, old upright and a glass jar of chocolates.

Joanne Haroutounian: *What are your earliest recollections of musical experiences, and who was influential in discovering that you had musical talent?*

Leon Bates: The first person who influenced me in terms of wanting to be involved in music at all was my kindergarten teacher. She exposed the class to music on a regular basis, playing recordings of all kinds and encouraging everyone to go up and play the old upright that was in our classroom. So, every day we had a chance to experience what it was like to press the

→

Even at the beginning of his career, Bates was interested in playing for young people. While preparing for his Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra debut in 1970 (right, rehearsing with Werner Torkanowsky), Bates appeared at two inner city high schools (below). When asked by a student why he played classical music, Bates replied that all musical expression, jazz, soul, gospel and classical, was "people's music," and that he was "doing his thing" by playing classical music because he could best express himself through it. The students gave him a standing ovation. Photographs and quotes from the April/May 1970 issue of *American Music Teacher*.



keys on the piano. It was an experience I remember distinctly, and I remember that it was thrilling. And so I became absolutely captivated with the piano. Whenever my mother and father would take me to a place where there was a piano, I would gravitate to it and start to play. It became something of a mania for me, and I begged for piano lessons from the beginning.

At age six, I began my first lessons with Cristofer Sinjani. He was a fine teacher because he knew how to relate to young children. He was a thoughtful man and knew how to motivate and educate. He was encouraging on a musical level and would immediately compliment you if you did something well. I remember he had this big glass jar of milk chocolates that he would keep on the top of the piano so it was always visible. At the end of a particularly good lesson, he would offer me some of the chocolates. That was a great incentive.

Mr. Sinjani was a very capable musician. Not only did he play the piano, but also violin, mandolin, banjo and guitar. Frequently at my piano lessons, he would take out his fiddle, put some music on

the piano and have me accompany him. It was a wonderful experience because it taught me about the interactive conditions of working with others in music and just how enjoyable that process can be. It also taught me some valuable things about sightreading. He also transcribed music for the different instruments he taught, and

students would meet for "orchestra" on Saturday mornings, performing these different pieces. So we learned to work together as a unit. I was about seven years old then. I was learning all these things at a time when I didn't even realize their value. These were good experiences. My identification with music and the piano was a very positive one.

JH: *As a teenager, you took lessons at the Settlement Music School in Philadelphia. What were those years like?*

LB: I began taking lessons with Irene Beck at the Settlement Music School when I was about twelve and continued studying with her until I was seventeen. She was the perfect person to go to after leaving Mr. Sinjani because she began to work on a more specific direction in terms of teaching me how to play in a pianistic way, how to interpret music and make it a much more personal experience. She began to introduce me to things I had not yet experienced, like the music of Frédéric Chopin. Mrs. Beck was a graduate of the Warsaw Conservatory, where she had received wonderful train-

ing as a concert pianist. She would inspire me by telling stories of the many great pianists she had heard in concerts and people she had met when they came to take coaching with her teacher, Edward Steuermann, in Warsaw. It was a very glamorous kind of thing, and she led me to believe, "You've got a place here, you can fit into this whole scheme of things if you so desire." At this point in my life I felt that, yes, being a professional musician, a concert pianist, is what I wanted to be. She knew that, and she trained me with that in mind.

She was a generous, positive and encouraging kind of woman, much along the same lines as Mr. Sinjani, maybe even more demonstrative. She tended to teach me like I was her son. She was also a very skilled pianist, which was perfect for me because I had a chance to work with someone who really understood on a higher level the ins and outs of playing the piano and how to make the piano very much a performing instrument. There were no gaps in my learning. If I needed to learn diminished seventh arpeggios, that's what we would work on. She would sit down and demonstrate, and I would think, "My God, can I do that?" I can hear her say, "Well, Leon, I know you didn't practice this week—I can hear it." She could tell in a minute. You couldn't get away with anything. At the same time, she was very encouraging—not the kind that was going to crack a ruler over your hand. She would make the experience very positive.

Being at the Settlement School also was an opportunity to be involved in a tremendously large school with lots and lots of kids and to be viewed and heard in a citywide arena. The Settlement Music School is the largest community music school in the country. There are four or

five branches in the city that serve thousands of students throughout childhood and adult years. It provides a huge service, because there are many fine, capable teachers at the Settlement.

The level of tutelage is high, which gives it a conservatory atmosphere. It serves as a real source of inspiration for anyone going there to study. When you hear so many talented people playing really well, it makes you say either, "Oh God, these people are so good," or "I can do that, I want to be that good." The branch of the Settlement that I went to was literally two blocks away from my high school. I got to meet kids from other parts of the city who studied there as well as mingle with friends who were in my school band or orchestra. You really got into a kind of club atmosphere, knowing people from different parts of the city who studied at the Settlement School. It was a tremendous encouragement to know you were a part of that as a teenager.

JH: *You continued your education in Philadelphia as well, at Temple University. Can you share those years with us?*

LB: I went to Temple University specifically to study with Natalie Hinderas, and again, I was leading a charmed life. Mrs. Beck suggested strongly that Natalie was someone I should work with because she could help me a great deal in terms of reaching my goals. She was every bit that, and then some. She was a wonderful friend, and a role model—in how to handle a career, how to be involved, how to exist in that day-to-day kind of life. She was very generous with her time, but more professional and serious-minded. She treated me in many ways like her child, too. If she was going on a concert tour, she would say, "Well, young man, I want to hear this complete sonata when I get back—all of the movements." She was very disciplined and didn't stand for any foolishness, which was a perfect atmosphere for a young man of seventeen looking to move on. She was quick to tell me I had great potential and talent and could achieve what I wanted to, but she was also quick to tell me I was going to have to work and that there were no shortcuts.

JH: *During those college years, you were the first piano winner of the MTNA Collegiate Artist Competition in 1968–69. What do you recall about this competition experience?*

LB: My involvement in the competition would have been in 1969 when I was a sophomore in college. I was on track with an inspiration toward a professional career. I had the good fortune of studying with Natalie Hinderas, who suggested that I be involved in the MTNA competition. Entering competitions was not new to me at that point. It was something I had been doing since I was thirteen and an integral part of the process of trying to reach my goal of professional status.

I didn't know much about the business in those days. I knew that I wanted to be a musician and that it was going to take a lot of practice and hard work—all of those things that your teachers inspire you to do. But at the same time, I knew that being in competitions was going to be a part of that. I did not have a problem dealing with that arena because competition was something I was comfortable with. I found that somehow or another I even exceeded myself in a lot of ways, being thrust into a circumstance where I was surrounded by many talented people. I found that being involved in the MTNA competition was a thrilling experience, especially at the national level where there were just ten of us from the different regions. I found the experience of going in and hearing those contestants, and then practicing myself, very positive.

JH: *I know you spend a great deal of time with young people in master classes and residency programs. You also are well aware of the tenuous position of the arts in today's schools. What are your views on the future of music and arts education in the school?*

LB: I think that it is important for everyone who is involved in education, be they science or math teachers, administrators or heads of school boards, to understand that training in and exposure to the arts is an integral part of the educational experience. When I think of the many aspects of my own development in

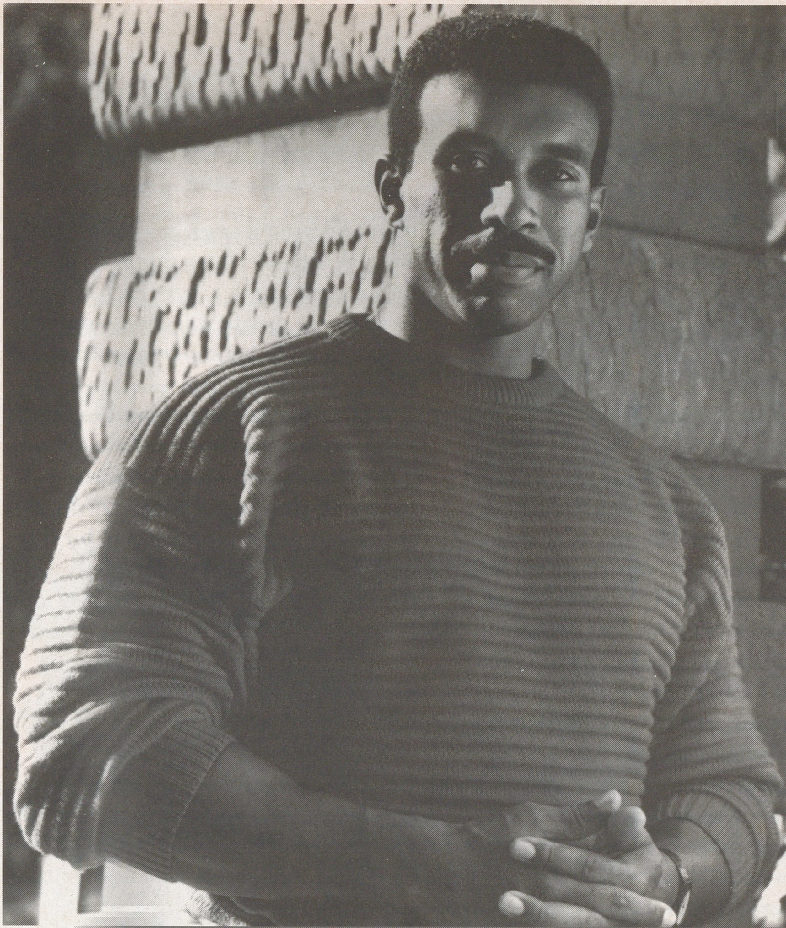
terms of learning to use my brain in an effective way—learning simply to sit still for a certain length of time each day and focus in one specific direction—this is a valuable lesson that can be applied to any subject in any situation.

I think that it is important at a time when, on one hand, people have the highest aspirations for our children to become proficient in science and math, that they also have the same concern for children to become adept and proficient and have a good background in the arts. The value of the arts is being able to appreciate many of the different categories—music, dance, opera, jazz—and simply learn to use your mind in that way and recognize that the creative aspect of an individual is the most valuable part of our civilization. And it manifests itself in so many different ways in terms of what we have available to us. It is a matter of appreciating a geometric shape, a fabulous building, a wonderful sculpture, a marvelously designed house, hearing a sound that is not necessarily created by a musical instrument, but identifying the sound as possibly being musical. Tapping into the mind that way develops an attitude in an individual, regardless of what your walk of life might be, that makes you a better person for having been involved in it.

I think it is important at this stage to not only train young people who have a gift and talent for making music at a professional level—that is going to happen because gifted people are going to seek it out—but it is equally important for all children to be exposed to music, even if it is deemed that they don't have specific musical talent. Because in many instances, they are going to grow up to be the legislators, lawmakers and administrators who will make decisions about what happens to the arts. If they have not been exposed to music, they will not have the appreciation.

JH: *How do you advise students who are interested in pursuing a musical career?*

LB: I tell them that if they love music, if they want it deep inside themselves, if they cannot talk themselves out of it, if they want it because they love music and not the idea of seeing their name in lights or making money, if they love the process



Away from the stage, Bates finds relaxation through sports and attending a variety of cultural events.

of making music—then, by all means, that is the direction to go. But it is important to recognize the reasons why you are doing it, because if you love music, you are a real musician. If it's because you want to be famous or want to make X amount of dollars, then it is important to find something else to do. There is an awful lot of work that is involved in the process. If you can find a reason not to do it, you probably will. But if you love music, you are motivated by the sound and the aspect of interacting with other musicians, fascinated with the mechanics of your instrument, then those are certainly reasons to be in a career. I would never dissuade anyone who feels that way about doing just that. I would give them every encouragement, every motivation.

Recently I spoke to some high school students who were really motivated in their school band and choir experience. I pointed out to them that I can remember being in that same position a few years ago. I played the violin, which I studied with my first teacher, and the tuba, which I played because they needed a

tuba player and I was the only person available to play it. I was only too happy to learn the tuba ("You mean, I can learn another instrument and be in the band or orchestra? Great!") I told them how thrilling it was for me to be part of that process and how much they ought to enjoy it and take advantage of every opportunity open to them. That is how skills and experiences are developed—by being involved in that way. Not just taking lessons every week and practicing at home in anonymity, but going out and seeking opportunities and trying to make the best of them. Winning the first prize is not the only advantage and reward coming from participating. You meet other people and establish relationships that teach you about the lifestyle of musical involvement. If they are exhilarated with the sound of music, identifying chords, or the sound of the choir and orchestra together, or the jazz band—those are important symbols of how important music is to them.

JH: *You obviously are committed to educating youth about the joy and value*

of music. Do you have anything you'd like to share with colleagues who are professional musicians?

LB: I feel strongly that many of us, as professionals, are not as involved in the process of trying to generate a new audience as perhaps we should be. Unfortunately, that has been one of the traditions in the music business. For a variety of reasons, many people who are involved in music professionally don't have the time to be involved in going into a school, community center or church to speak to people, or play for them. It has been deemed as not that important to do, or the kind of thing that, once you have reached a certain professional status, you no longer do. I think those are serious miscalculations and that is part of the reason we are in the dilemma we are in right now. I feel we need to reach the point where people who are outstanding in their fields become the most vital spokespersons of the craft and the art.

I think I have been very fortunate to have reached a certain level of professionalism in my career and to have been in the business as long as I have. I have loved every minute of it. There is always the matter of giving something back to the community that helped you reach some of your levels of achievement. As long as I can be involved in this process, I don't think there is any point in my career that would make me feel it is no longer necessary or important for me to be involved.

If I were to live my life all over again, I would do it the same way, because all of the things that came up in my deck of cards were perfect in terms of trying to aspire to what I wanted to achieve.

AMT

"MTNA Winners After A Decade: Portraits of Commitment and Excellence" will conclude Joanne Haroutounian's two-part series on past MTNA competition winners. Look for it in the next issue of AMT.